DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 929 SO 030 923

AUTHOR	Vontz, Thomas S.; Nixon, William A.
TITLE	Issue-Centered Civic Education in Middle Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-1999-3
PUB DATE	1999-05-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0016
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN, 47408; Tel: 800-266-3815 (Toll Free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship Education; *Civics; Instructional Materials; Law Related Education; *Middle Schools; Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The core mission of the social studies curriculum is education for democratic citizenship. The middle school years are an important time frame in which to fulfill that core mission. Policymakers, educators, community members, and parents need to recognize that civic education at the middle level years is important. One effective method for accomplishing middle school instruction in civic education is issue-centered education. Two perennial questions accompany this instructional method: (1) is the teaching of content culled from history and the social sciences appropriately tailored for young minds, adequate citizenship education in and of itself? and (2) should students first master a core body of information and concepts before being asked to consider the issues that face adult citizens? Issue-centered civic education examines social questions within a discipline-based or interdisciplinary curriculum. An exemplary issue-centered civic education program is "We the People Project Citizen." Developed and sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, it was launched in California in 1992 and expanded to national usage in 1995. The program is created specifically for middle school students and involves them in the civic life of their community. "Project Citizen" has been evaluated by a comprehensive, eight-month study conducted at the University of Texas. The research report indicated several positive outcomes of the program. In addition, "We the People Project Citizen" is a flexible program that can fit into many classroom settings. (JH)

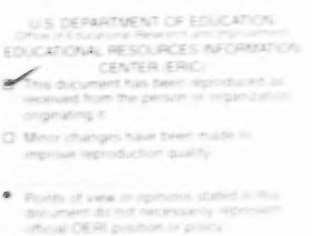
****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 429 929

Issue-Centered Civic Education in Middle Schools.

by
Thomas S. Vontz and William A. Nixon

SO 030 923


U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
Bloomington, Indiana

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Digest
Clearinghouse for Social Studies/ Social Science Education

2805 EAST TENTH STREET • SUITE 120
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

EDO-SO-1999-3 May 1999

Issue-Centered Civic Education in Middle Schools

By Thomas S. Vontz and William A. Nixon

There is a broad consensus among social studies educators that the core mission of a social studies curriculum is education for democratic citizenship. Of course, there is an appropriate place for civic education at every level of learning. It is increasingly recognized, however, that the middle school years are an important time in the development of civic roles and responsibilities. Yet there is a general lack of institutionalized civic education aimed at promoting democratic citizenship during the middle school years (Policy Research Project 1998, xv & 16). Educators, policymakers, parents, and concerned members of the community need to recognize civic education in middle school as a prime concern, and issue-centered education as an effective way to respond to this concern.

Issue-Centered Education: The Pros and Cons. Even where there is a commitment to providing a foundation in civic education, the question remains: how should citizenship be taught to middle school students? On this point there has been considerable debate for several decades. James P. Shaver (1992, 95) has broken down the argument into two perennial questions: (1) is the teaching of content culled from history and the social sciences, appropriately tailored for young minds, adequate citizenship education in and of itself? and (2) should students first master a core body of information and concepts before being asked to consider the issues that face adult citizens, or will the learning of information and concepts take place more effectively in the context of confronting issues? Educators who answer "no" to the first question, and who support learning in the context of confronting problems, have turned to the issue- or problem-centered approach to civic education.

While several approaches to issue-centered civic education have been advanced, most proponents agree on some common principles. Broadly speaking, issue-centered education examines social questions. The method can be used within either discipline-based or interdisciplinary curricula. Further, it seeks to examine problems and dilemmas confronting citizens. At the core of issue-centered education are reflective questions that may be answered variously, and that emphasize thoughtfulness and depth. In the process of examining reflective questions and reaching a decision, there should be an assessment of evidence, competing values, and alternative outcomes. At its best, issue-centered civic education promises a high level of integrated learning and student involvement in the learning process.

Despite the efforts of its advocates, the issue-centered approach has failed to gain wide acceptance. There are many factors that account for this, but three pointed criticisms have been made that are worth considering. First, some teachers, parents, and community groups have expressed reservation about the emphasis on potentially controversial problems at the heart of the issue-centered approach. While examining issues of public policy is central to citizenship, there is concern that an unthinking "controversy-is-good-per-se" attitude can create an unnecessary adversarial climate (Shaver 1992, 99).

Another reservation about the issue-centered approach comes from proponents of a content-based civic education. Because an issue-centered approach requires a significant allocation of scarce classroom resources and extra effort by teachers, it effectively reduces the time that can be spent on content coverage. This factor can make the issue-centered approach unattractive to teachers who are committed to exposing students to a broad content curriculum. While most teachers are willing to trade breadth of knowledge for a greater depth of understanding, there is the concern that by adopting an issue-centered approach, content will be sacrificed to the extent that students will lack the knowledge base that is a prerequisite for an informed examination of policy problems.

Finally, some doubts have been raised about the methodology of issue-centered education. Many educators believe that the structure provided by the framework of an established discipline is crucial to teaching and learning. Here, the concern is that the issue-centered approach, with its emphasis on interdisciplinary subject matter and process over content, lacks the conceptual structure needed to facilitate achievement of content standards.

The criticisms of issue-centered civic education are valid. But if teachers want to prepare students for effective and responsible democratic citizenship, they must challenge students to confront issues of public policy in the classroom (Massialas 1989, 173). The challenge is how to take advantage of the benefits of issue-centered civic education without sacrificing student achievement of content standards in the teaching and learning of civics/government. *We the People ... Project Citizen* is a program that responds effectively to the challenges raised by critics of issue-centered education.

An Exemplary Issue-Centered Civic Education Program. Educators committed to issue-centered civic education in the middle schools need to become acquainted with *We the People ... Project Citizen*, developed and sponsored by the Center for Civic Education. Launched in California in 1992 and expanded to national usage in 1995, *Project Citizen* is a civic education program created specifically for middle school students which involves them in the civic life of their community. The program combines active learning in both classrooms and communities with a team-based project activity that builds a sense of community and a deep understanding of public policy.

Thomas S. Vontz is director of the Indiana Program for Law-Related Education at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University. William A. Nixon is a doctoral student in history at Indiana University and a project assistant at the Social Studies Development Center.

Since becoming a national program in 1995, *Project Citizen* has been implemented in 38 states and is likely to expand into all 50 states.

The focal points of the program are teaching students to monitor and influence public policy and and to encourage civic participation among students, their parents, and other members of the community. Students are asked to step outside of the classroom and examine real problems in their schools or communities (e.g., drug abuse, pollution, and graffiti); analyze possible solutions; create an action plan; and finally, present their findings in a public forum. The project has three overall goals: (1) to provide the knowledge and skills for effective participation in civic and political life; (2) to provide practical experience designed to foster a sense of competence and efficacy; and (3) to develop an understanding of the importance of citizen participation. Overall, *Project Citizen* gives 10-to-15-year-olds the opportunity to participate in civil society and to practice critical thinking, dialogue and debate, negotiation, tolerance, decision-making, and civic action (Policy Research Project 1998, 2 & 17).

Project Citizen responds to many of the criticisms that educators have directed against issue-centered education. Instead of injecting problems into the classrooms merely for the sake of creating controversy, the program encourages students to examine important questions of policy that are relevant to them and their communities. The format of *Project Citizen* helps ensure that when difficult questions are raised, as they so often are in civic and political life, the students think through the issues while remaining respectful of differences of opinion and other points of view. Moreover, *Project Citizen* is particularly well-suited to effectively complement a well-structured, content-based civic education curriculum, giving students the opportunity to put the ideas they have learned in the classroom into practice. Finally, while *Project Citizen* is a flexible program, it is also an outstanding example of an issue-centered approach that fits within the larger framework of civic education for democracy, with all the benefits that working within that structural framework provides.

An Evaluation of *We the People . . . Project Citizen*. In September 1997, a research team led by Professor Kenneth Tolo conducted a comprehensive, eight-month study of *Project Citizen* at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs of the University of Texas at Austin. The research team published a report of its findings in 1998. The key findings of the report were:

- students using *Project Citizen* believe they can—and do—make a difference in their communities;
- students and teachers believe that *Project Citizen* helps students develop a greater understanding of public policy, helps students learn how their government works, develops student commitment to active citizenship and governance, involves students in their communities, and helps students learn about specific community problems;
- students and teachers believe *Project Citizen* teaches students important communication and research skills; and
- students enjoy *Project Citizen* (Policy Research Project 1998, xviii).

Perhaps as important as these points is that *Project Citizen*, a flexible program, can fit into many classroom settings. It can be used successfully in classes covering diverse subject matter and in classes of varying academic ability, including those with gifted and talented students and students of mixed ability. *Project Citizen* is used primarily in sixth through eighth grades, but also with students as young as fifth grade and as old as twelfth grade (Policy Research Project 1998, xvii). For more information about *Project Citizen*, contact the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467; telephone (800) 350-4223; FAX (818) 591-9330; World Wide Web <www.civiced.org>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

Evans, Ronald W. "A Dream Unrealized: A Brief Look at the History of Issue-Centered Approaches." SOCIAL STUDIES 80 (September-October 1989): 178-184. EJ 403 153.

Evans, Ronald W., and David Warren Saxe, Eds. HANDBOOK OF TEACHING SOCIAL ISSUES. NCSS BULLETIN 93. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996. ED 410 141.

Gross, Richard E. "Reasons for the Limited Acceptance of the Problems Approach." SOCIAL STUDIES 80 (September-October 1989): 185-186. EJ 403 154.

Massialas, Byron G. "The Inevitability of Issue-Centered Discourse in the Classroom." SOCIAL STUDIES 80 (September-October 1989): 173-175. EJ 403 151.

Policy Research Project Report. AN ASSESSMENT OF WE THE PEOPLE . . . PROJECT CITIZEN: PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP IN CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES. Austin, Texas: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs Policy Research Project Report Number 129, 1998.

Rossi, John Allen. THE PRACTICE OF IN-DEPTH STUDY IN AN ISSUES-ORIENTED SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, November 18, 1994. ED 380 389.

Shaver, James P. "Rationales for Issues-Centered Social Studies Education." SOCIAL STUDIES 83 (May-June 1992): 95-99. EJ 458 397.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0016. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.